

Mini-Articles: Social Media

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Social Media & Grieving Children: Helpful or Harmful?

Social media is a simple fact of student life today. The vast majority of teens spend time on social media sites, and many younger students do as well.

When a child has experienced the death of a family member or close friend, can social media be a good thing? Or is it more likely to cause distress and harm?

David Schonfeld, MD, Director of the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, explains that, “The discussion is not whether grieving students *should* be using social media, or whether it is appropriate. Rather, it is how best to adapt to its use in this context, and in what ways it can be used optimally.”

Comfortable Space, Unique Opportunities

Adults are sometimes uncomfortable with the use of social media, especially when dealing with sensitive topics. For most children and adolescents, however, social media is a familiar and comfortable way to communicate.

These formats—Facebook, Twitter, texting, Instagram, instant messaging and more—offer unique and even powerful ways children can gain support and check in with peers. In fact, many children dealing with bereavement choose these avenues as their preferred methods of communication.

Why?

It's familiar. Young people communicate in these ways about all kinds of life events, including some that are quite serious.

It offers control. Grieving students can decide when to read and respond to a text, for example. They can monitor their reactions and only need to share what they choose to. They can opt to be more open and vulnerable with close friends, and a bit more distant with others. They can respond when they feel composed and ready to do so.

Others may share more openly. The sense of privacy users often feel with social media can allow classmates to share personal and sensitive responses they might not share as openly in an in-person setting.

Challenges and Cautions

It is also important for grieving children to have face-to-face time with supportive peers and adults. Social media interactions will be most helpful when they are balanced with real-world contacts. Relying only on social media can increase the sense of social isolation grieving children may feel.

People may say hurtful or inappropriate things through social media. This might include peers or strangers who are able to see a post related to a grieving student's loss. Grieving students may also come across disturbing news items online, about their own loss or other deaths.

Education professionals are one of the most important face-to-face contacts for grieving students. When talking with students, consider checking in about the kind of support they're getting (or not getting) in social media. Teachers might suggest parents of grieving students consider monitoring their children's social media feeds, or ask their children about the social media content on their sites.

Learn more about the benefits and pitfalls of social media and ways to offer support to students at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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Social Media and School Response to a Death: Prepare Your School By Doing An Audit

When the death of a student or school staff member occurs, schools will want to have a variety of policies in place—who at the school is notified first? How is the information confirmed? How are staff notified? Who determines what information is given to students?

An important area that may be overlooked is social media. Schools can become better prepared for such events by performing a social media audit.

Challenges

Social media is an undeniable part of student and campus life. Here are some common experiences for schools today when a member of their school community dies.

- News of the death is communicated rapidly across the campus through texting and social media. Students often learn of a death before staff. Rumors and

inaccurate information may spread. Teachers may find themselves responding to students' questions about a death without having the basic facts.

- News about real-time critical incidents may be communicated (e.g., a shooting in the community, the death of a police officer). These may involve students, family members or staff.
- Students on field trips may learn about a death before teachers and chaperones.
- Negative or hurtful comments may appear on Facebook pages or other social media sites. Vulnerable students may make references to suicidal thoughts.

Auditing Policies: Three Areas to Explore

School policies concerning social media can be reviewed with an eye to how they can be crafted to best support grieving students. Three areas can be especially useful.

1. *Planning and implementation.* What are the goals of the school's social media efforts? How are they measured? How are staff and students offered education about social media use?

An informed and educated school community will understand what sorts of activities and comments are appropriate during times of hardship, such as when an individual or the school community is grieving.

2. *Policies.* What are staff and student responsibilities concerning social media? What are the standards of conduct? What are the responses to misconduct? How will social media be used in the event of a critical incident?

Preparing ahead can help support appropriate communications and prevent or limit inappropriate uses of social media.

3. *Monitoring.* How is the school monitoring social media references to itself and its students? How does the school monitor possible threats, risks or harassment among students? What special steps are taken during and after a loss or critical incident?

Having standards and practices in place can better guide responses after the death of a member of the school community. This is helpful for all students, including a student who has lost a loved one or vulnerable students who may be at greater emotional risk.

Learn more about ways to offer support to grieving students at the website of the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#). Our organization is a member of the Coalition.

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Offer Positive Guidance to Grieving Students About Social Media

Social media is a simple fact of student life today. The vast majority of teens spend time on social media sites, and many younger students do as well. Grieving students frequently communicate with peers through texting and social media. There are good reasons for this.

It's familiar. Young people communicate in these ways about all kinds of life events, including some that are quite serious. They're used to it.

It's simpler. A student can communicate broadly and immediately with a large group of friends and acquaintances. There's no need to contact everyone individually and go through the pain of telling the story over and over again.

It offers control. Grieving students can decide when to read and respond to someone's post or text. They can compose themselves, think things through and respond when they're ready.

Educators: Offer Support and Guidance

Grieving children also need face-to-face time with supportive peers and adults. Social media interactions will be most helpful when they are balanced with real-world contacts.

Education professionals are one of the most important face-to-face contacts for grieving students. When talking with students, look for opportunities to ask specifically about the kind of support they're getting (or not getting) through texting or social media.

Begin by expressing your condolences and checking in generally on how they're doing. As the conversation continues, or in a subsequent conversation, you might ask questions such as these:

- Have you posted about your loss on Facebook? How did that go?
- What have you heard from your friends? Are they texting you or posting on your Facebook page?
- Sometimes, people who go through an experience like the death of a family member see things on social media that help them cope with their sad feelings.

Sometimes they see things that are hurtful or troublesome. I'm wondering what sorts of things you've been seeing.

If students are experiencing troublesome posts or harassment, help them problem-solve. You may want to link them with technical support to block negative posts. In some situations, counseling support for the student or disciplinary action against offenders may be called for.

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students was convened by the New York Life Foundation, a pioneering advocate for the cause of childhood bereavement, and the National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement, which is led by pediatrician and childhood bereavement expert David J. Schonfeld, M.D. The Coalition has worked with Scholastic Inc., a long-standing supporter of teachers and kids, to create [grievingstudents.org](#), a groundbreaking, practitioner-oriented website designed to provide educators with the information, insights, and practical advice they need to better understand and meet the needs of the millions of grieving kids in America's classrooms.